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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABUJA 000457

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [KDEM](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: POSSIBLE CONFLICT OVER BUHARI'S CAMPAIGN LAUNCHING

REF: ABUJA 0448

Classified by DCM T.D. Andrews. Reasons 1.5 (B & D).

1. (C) According to retired Air Vice Marshal Moukhtar Mohammed, one of the close advisers to ANPP Presidential Candidate Muhammadu Buhari, Buhari plans go ahead with the launching of his campaign in Port Harcourt on March 8. The campaign team plans to travel to the area with the body of Marshall Harry, his murdered campaign coordinator for the south-south zone (Reftel). The campaign also hopes to hold a special mass in Odi, the site of the 2001 massacre of civilians by Nigerian military forces, to commemorate Harry's life and to remember the victims of the attack on the village. "It is tragic, and most of us are shaken up, but it is more important now than ever to advance Buhari's campaign," Moukhtar told Poloff.

2. (C) According to a source in the Presidency, at least a thousand soldiers have been deployed to Port Harcourt to help stem any outbreak of violence there in the aftermath of Harry's death. Additionally, he stated, Rivers State Governor Peter Odili has contacted the Presidency to urge Obasanjo to cancel Buhari's rally in the area due to "security concerns."

3. (C) COMMENT: Harry's death in close proximity to Buhari's official campaign starting could serve to inflame an already uneasy electorate. From what it appears, the Buhari campaign will exploit Harry's exit for all it is worth. They hope it will energize what has been a heretofore lackluster, informal campaign and also open a door for Buhari to appeal to voters in the important South-South region. This weekend, there may be a potential confrontation over campaign rallies. Buhari, with too much to gain from staging the rally, and Odili (and by extension, Obasanjo) with much to lose if the memory of Marshall Harry does not fade away quickly, could be headed for a showdown over the weekend. If so, this will ratchet up tensions significantly as Nigeria head into the last month before elections.

JETER